

Donna Forbes

On a sparkling winter morning in 1998, two years after the Yellowstone Art Center closed for renovation and construction, the new Yellowstone Art Museum opened to the public, adding 25,000 feet of galleries, an education studio, meeting room and storage facilities to the original building.

Architect Thomas Hacker's gleaming, light-filled design embodied the history of the museum, its growth and transformation, and provided a state-of-the-art platform for the museum's future.

Executive director Donna M. Forbes invited the assembled crowd into the \$6.2 million facility: "We have created a place that is elegant, warm and inviting. Come often. It is your building."

With those inclusive and welcoming words, Forbes opened the new building that she, more than anyone else, had envisioned and worked to build. At the same time, she closed her professional career, retiring the next day at age 68 after almost 24 years' service as the museum's director. Recognizing her contributions, Capital Campaign volunteer leaders named the new gallery wing for her.

Forbes, who was raised in Billings, was part of the Art Center from the first. She was among the volunteers who gathered to renovate the abandoned Yellowstone County Jail and convert it into a community center for art exhibitions and classes, opening in October 1964. In subsequent years she served as a volunteer, teacher and trustee, and in 1974, became the institution's fourth executive director.

When Forbes took the helm, paid staff numbered four, the budget was about \$70,000, and only the ground floor and basement of the old building were being utilized for public programs. Exhibitions were rented from traveling exhibition services or featured local artists and arts organizations. There was a volunteer-run sales shop, and the basement housed a resident potter's studio and classroom.

By 1996, when the center closed for construction, there were 15 paid staff and the budget was in excess of \$700,000.

Throughout her career as director, Forbes was actively involved with the American Association of Museums, the Art Museum Association of America, the Western States Arts Federation, and the Montana Art Gallery Directors Association. During the 1990s she served on the board of the American Federation of the Arts, and she was among the first museum professionals to complete the prestigious Museum Management Institute program at the University of California, Berkeley.

Museum administrators across Montana say she provided inspiration and leadership to them. "Donna Forbes has been the single most influential person in shaping and professionalizing the museum field in Montana," writes Liz Gans, former director of the Holter Museum in Helena.

Laura Millin, director of the Missoula Art Museum, says that when she assumed that post in 1990, "I immediately sought Donna out as a mentor. After all, she had blazed the trail for contemporary art in Montana." Looking back at a successful capital campaign and expansion of the Missoula museum, "I can honestly say that Donna Forbes paved the way for my success," adds Millin.

Forbes had a close friendship with her great teacher and mentor, the painter and rancher, Isabelle Johnson, and became friends with Johnson's Montana modernist

compatriots: Bill Stockton, Edith Freeman, Lyndon Pomeroy, Jessie Wilber, Frances Senska, Bob and Gennie DeWeese, and Rudy and Lela Autio.

During her tenure, the art center became the first museum in Montana to actively collect the works of the state's leading contemporary artists. "The Montana Collection" encompassed works by both the older generation, and younger artists, such as Theodore Waddell, Russell Chatham, Deborah Butterfield and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

Bob Durden, curator of art at Paris Gibson Square in Great Falls, notes that "in a state rife with a history of exporting its best resources, Donna Forbes' work, power and influence assured that an art legacy did not go the way of gold, silver, copper and coal."

The collection's breadth and vision captured the imagination of the late Billings philanthropist Miriam Sample, who contributed more than \$500,000 to acquisitions, publications, and an innovative series of television PSAs on the artists in the collection. "I see Donna Forbes as a transformational leader, a cultural missionary, a keenly sensitive, intelligent, and ever-curious human being – wide awake, idealistic, humane, and pragmatic – a serious dreamer," writes artist Gordon McConnell, a former assistant director and curator at the Yellowstone Art Museum. "Few Montanans have made such a far-reaching and lasting contribution to the artistic culture of the state."

Profile written by Kristi Niemeyer for the Montana Arts Council.